

# City takes giant step forward in effort to earn Great Place status

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108

Perry Chief  
Perry, IA  
Circ. 2431  
From Page:  
1  
9/22/2005  
44138

Now comes the waiting, which is often called the hardest part.

The city of Perry must now wait for a few weeks to find out if the presentation it gave to three members of the state's Great Places board was worth it.

The presentation, which included a tour, a slide-show, and a question-answer session, was made Friday. Local officials who helped with the presentation included Mayor Viivi Shirley, City Administrator Butch Niebuhr, and Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Sara Truesdell. Others who were on hand included Perry School District Superintendent Randy McCaulley and Perry LINK's Rosa Morales Di Gonzalez.

The group that has been working on the Great Places application includes a number of other individuals, and their work and effort was evident in how well the city was presented, according to the three judges.

"This presentation, of those that I've seen, has certainly been the most inclusive of a variety of community members," said Sam Erickson. Erickson is the Vice President of Community Housing Initiatives in Spencer. She, along with Claire Celsi and Rita Vargas, served as the judges for Perry. They are part of a 12-member board that will be travelling across

Iowa over the next couple weeks to adjudicate 73 Great Places applicants.

Erickson said she is entering each place with an open mind.

"The great thing about this program is there is no set structure or application," she explained. "Every community has its own interpretation of how to go about doing their presentation."

The presentation on Friday was Erickson's sixth, Celsi's first, and Vargas's seventh. They all agreed that Perry left them with a very positive impression.

"I can't help but be impressed with what I've seen here in Perry," Celsi said. Celsi, who works in public rela-

tions for Strategic America out of Des Moines, said she knew of some of the goings-on in Perry due to her home in Des Moines, but seeing everything she has heard and/or read about gave her a better appreciation for it.

"This city has quite a few of the elements that Great Places is about," Celsi noted. "There is broad community support, there are good ideas, and there is a good amount of diversity. It's all rolled into one, so the city is really off to a good start."

"One thing all three judges agreed with was the welcome feeling they got when given a tour. According to Erickson, it adds to a community's presentation.

"This is only the second city I've

visited that's given a tour," she said. "It's nice when you're given a tour because that way you can get an idea of what the community really looks like instead of sitting in one place. It's really nice that we had the tour."

Along with the tour, the judges agreed that Perry's inclusiveness was a major plus.

"It helps out if it's genuine and not contrived," said Celsi. "Perry has that genuine attitude, and the inclusiveness seems very real to me."

"When you have that it means more than just a few people are contributing pieces of the puzzle to the finished product," Celsi continued. "And not only is Perry including people of diverse backgrounds in this, but they have already made attempts to reach out to other state agencies and are not just sitting around waiting for help. That makes this proposal that much stronger."

Erickson echoed Celsi's statement. "Some of the applicants I've seen so far have used civic organizations to help create their presentation. I think Perry has done a really nice job bringing together several groups, though versus a few that were already formed," she said.

"It appears to me the community has done a good job creating a new body, a Great Places body, and I think that is the governor's goal," Erickson added.

Turn to GREAT, Page 6A





Perry Chief  
Perry, IA  
Circ. 2431  
From Page:  
6  
9/22/2005  
44138



## GREAT: Judges impressed with Perry

Continued from Page 1A

Vargas pointed out another unique feature in Perry's Great Places proposal.

"This is the first place I've visited that is working in phases," she said. "They've already completed the first phase and are in the second phase.

"It's obvious that the city has a vision," Vargas said. "And they can fit us into that vision."

Vargas added that the Perry presentation was "very streamlined and well-rehearsed. They didn't waste any of our time and you can tell they put a lot of hard work and thought into it."

Originally 146 places applied to be among the first three Great Places. Cindy Peterson, the director of Great Places, said a number of invitations came from collaborating areas. After the initial meetings with Great Places coaches half of the applicants withdrew their names from consideration. Peterson said the communities that withdrew were mostly "not ready" to be a Great Place, but were on their way to at least being considered in a year or so.

In terms of the size of the applicants, Peterson said she was unsure how many communities were comparable to Perry. She did say, though, "146

applicants represented 93 counties." She added, "For a new initiative like this to be so widespread, it's a really good thing."

Erickson piggybacked on that comment.

"The board feels very strongly that size won't be an issue in this" and neither will geographics," she said. "What we're looking for is for three really unique proposals that we feel are outside of the box thinking, innovative ideas that showcase the ability and creativity of Iowans."

And, in Perry, that creativity gave the city an excellent chance to become a Great Place.